

# Introduction to Summer Bible Study

by Karen G. Bockelman

**wa-ter** (wôt' r, wät'-) n. [OE wæter] **1** *the colorless, transparent liquid occurring on earth as rivers, lakes, oceans, etc., and falling from the clouds as rain: chemically a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, H<sub>2</sub>O.*

Dictionaries have their place—to provide straightforward definitions of our basic vocabulary. But to define water in terms of a chemical compound or a liquid found in certain forms isn't very inspiring. It's so ordinary that we take it for granted.

**bap-tism** (bap'tiz' m) n. [< Gr baptizein] **1** *the ceremony or sacrament of admitting a person into Christianity or a specific Christian church by immersing the individual in water or by pouring or sprinkling water on the individual.*

The dictionary definition of baptism is not much better. Oh, there are a few more evocative words—sacrament, immersing, pouring, sprinkling—but it still sounds pretty ordinary, like joining a club. Baptism, too, can be taken for granted, especially by those who have grown up in the church.

Although the dictionary gives multiple meanings of a word, the sense of layered meanings, of poetic imagination, is lost. Richness is overshadowed by the commonplace.

**come** (kum) vi. [< OE cumen] **1** *to move from a place thought of as “there” to or into a place thought of as “here.”*

Now that's a more evocative definition! This summer Bible study is an invitation to move from the “there” of ordinary water and customary baptism to the “here” of exploring their many layers of meaning.

Water and baptism are bound together not only in the use of water for the rite, but in powerful images of birth and death, renewal and cleansing. Our study will draw on Scripture, the baptismal service, Martin Luther, the ELCA's statement on sacramental practices, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, as well as the experience and insights of study participants.

## Session 1: Water, Water Everywhere

In this session we will focus on the richness of water imagery in the Bible. For a desert people, water meant life and was a miraculous sign of God's goodness. From the beginning of creation through the new Jerusalem in Revelation, water signs and narratives are a constant presence in Scripture.

## Session 2: It's a Matter of Death and Life

This session will have Holy Baptism as its primary focus. We are reminded that in baptism God brings us out of death into life, by joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

## Session 3: Living Water, Walking Wet

Here we will focus on what it means to live a baptismal life. Although a person is baptized once, the gift of baptism continues throughout a Christian's life. This is our primary vocation, our calling, lived out in the world.

So, come to the waters. Explore the riches of the Bible. Deepen your understanding of baptism. Consider your calling. And prepare to get wet!



## BIBLE STUDY

COME TO THE WATERS SESSION 1

# Water, Water Everywhere

by Karen G. Bockelman

### Hymn

“Crashing Waters at Creation,”  
*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 455

Crashing waters at creation,  
ordered by the Spirit’s breath,  
first to witness day’s beginning  
from the brightness of night’s death.

Parting water stood and trembled  
as the captives passed on through,  
washing off the chains of bondage—  
channel to a life made new.

Cleansing water once at Jordan  
closed around the one foretold,  
opened to reveal the glory  
ever new and ever old.

Living water, never ending,  
quench the thirst and flood the soul.  
Wellspring, source of life eternal,  
drench our dryness, make us whole.

*Text: Sylvia G. Dunstan, 1955–1993*

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### Opening Prayer

The leader addresses the group.

*Joined to Christ in baptism, let us come to the waters and give thanks  
for this gift.*

Water may be poured into a bowl as the leader alone or the group  
together gives thanks.

*We give you thanks, O God,  
for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters  
and by your Word you created the world,  
calling forth life in which you took delight.*

*Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family.  
Through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom.  
At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with  
the Holy Spirit.*

*By water and your Word you claim us as daughters and sons,  
making us heirs of your promise and servants of all.  
We praise you for the gift of water that sustains life,  
and above all we praise you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ.*

*Shower us with your Spirit,  
and renew our lives with your forgiveness, grace and love.  
To you be given honor and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever.*

*Amen.*

adapted from *Thanksgiving for Baptism*  
*Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 97*

## Generous Water

Throughout my years as a parish pastor, I delighted in baptisms. I began my ministry using *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* and came to cherish its baptismal service, especially the prayer of thanksgiving over the water. This prayer was new to many Lutherans then, but it reflected a practice of both the early church and Martin Luther. In fact, the *LBW* prayer was an adaptation of the “Flood Prayer” Luther included in his 1523 Order of Baptism. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* continues the use of a prayer of thanksgiving at the font.

In this prayer, God’s saving deeds are remembered, especially those saving acts that are connected with water, emphasizing the baptismal connection of water and word. Not surprisingly, the increase in water language led to an increased use of water—even the practice of baptizing by immersion! It became my own practice, during this prayer, to pour the water from a pitcher into the font or bowl. Holding the pitcher high and pouring slowly, I wanted everyone to see and hear (and for those nearby, even feel) the water. The baptism pages of my *LBW* became permanently wrinkled and water-spotted.

I still remember clearly the definition of a sacrament that I learned in confirmation class: A sacrament is a holy act instituted by Christ in which by visible means God gives and seals invisible grace. Water is the visible means of baptism. The reality of water, seen and heard and felt, leaves no doubt that God’s promise of forgiveness of sin, deliverance from death, and everlasting salvation is real and meant for you and me. These gifts, along with new birth, adoption as God’s children, and membership in the body of Christ—these gifts are what our gracious and generous God gives us. What better way to illustrate God’s generosity than through the generous use of water?

## Sharing

- > *The hymn and prayer suggested for the opening of this session draw on biblical images and stories of water, deepening our understanding of both Scripture and baptism.*
- > *Look again at these texts and circle every instance of the word “water.” How many are there? What other watery words do you find?*

## Water Everywhere

Water is all around us and within us. Roughly 70 percent of an adult’s body is water. Somewhere between 70 and 75 percent of the earth’s surface is covered with water. For most of us, water is available with the turn of a tap or the push of a button. We have water in tubs, pools, shower stalls, sprinklers, irrigation systems, car washes, washing machines, rivers, streams, lakes, oceans, and birdbaths. We have water to drink, wash in, play in, nurture animals and plants with, transport cargo on, and enjoy. In the United States, the average person uses 80 to 100 gallons of water per day.

Water is all around and within the Bible, too. From the watery chaos before the Creation, through the Flood and the Exodus, to Jesus’ own baptism at the Jordan, these particular biblical water stories have long been understood to be “types,” or foreshadowings, of baptism. Let’s take a closer look at each of them.

## The Creation

### READ GENESIS 1:1–10, 2:5–9.

Water plays a significant role in the creation narratives. Ancient peoples believed the world originated from and was founded upon a watery abyss, the “deep.” Just as human beings begin in the waters of the womb, the earth itself is born out of the waters of the deep. Job 38:8–11 describes the Creation in terms of the sea bursting out from the womb.

Genesis 1 begins with a portrayal of this uncreated watery chaos—the earth as a formless void, covered by

darkness, swept by the Spirit of God. All life comes from water. On the second day, God separates the waters from the waters. The sky, like a great dome, walls off the waters of chaos above. On the third day, the waters below are gathered together into seas and dry land appears.

The creation narrative of Genesis 2 also begins with water—a stream rising from the earth and watering the ground, even before the creation of the Garden of Eden.

At the end of the Bible, creation comes full circle with a new heaven and a new earth. The sea is no more (Revelation 21:1) and the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God (22:1).

### Sharing

- > How do you think the waters of the Creation are linked to the waters of baptism? What themes do you find in common?

## The Flood

**READ GENESIS 6:11–22, 7:11–18, 8:6–18.**

The Flood is a story of creation and cleansing. The earth has become corrupt because of the wickedness of humankind. In judgment, God causes all the fountains of the deep to burst forth and the windows of the heavens to open. It is a near return to chaos. Water once again covers everything, washing away corruption.

But Noah, a righteous man, had found favor in God's sight. God commanded him to build an ark so that he, his family, and representative animals could ride out the flood. Early Christians explicitly spoke of Noah and his family being saved through water (1 Peter 3:20–21) and of this act prefiguring baptism.

### Sharing

- > What relationship do you see between the waters of the Flood and the waters of baptism? What themes do you find in common here?

## The Exodus

**READ EXODUS 14:10–31.**

The story of Israel's deliverance from slavery into freedom is told as an escape across the Red Sea. Biblical scholars have long debated the geography of the crossing and what kind of natural phenomenon may have made it possible. We may be more likely to see this event in the movie images of *The Ten Commandments* or *The Prince of Egypt*.

What is clear is that once again salvation and new life come from passing through water. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of this event as a baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1–4).

### Sharing

- > What relationship do you see between Israel's crossing the sea and baptism? What themes do you find in common?

## Jesus' Baptism

**READ MATTHEW 3:13–17.**

Like John the Baptist, there are those who wonder that Jesus came to be baptized. He certainly didn't need baptism for the forgiveness of his sins. But by coming to John, Jesus identifies with all those who responded to the Baptist's call for repentance. In baptism, Jesus begins his ministry by passing through the water.

In baptism, we stand with Jesus in the Jordan River. We, too, feel the water and hear the word, God's voice naming us beloved children. For Apostle Paul and for Martin Luther, when we are baptized, we are united with Christ. We share in Christ's death and in his resurrection (Romans 6:3–4).

### Sharing

- > What connections between Jesus' baptism and your own baptism are meaningful for you?

## Lots of Water

You may be feeling a bit over your head in all this water, but we've barely gotten a sprinkling. Once you start looking for it, the Bible is soaking wet! There are still and stormy waters, fountains of living water and wells of salvation, thirst for living water and streams in the desert, human groanings are poured out like water, but love cannot be quenched by many waters, the wise are like trees planted by streams of water, justice and righteousness roll down like the waters of an everlasting stream.

In addition to these poetic watery metaphors, there are many well-known, even beloved, stories that happen around water. Hagar is saved from death by the appearance of a well, Moses is drawn up out of the water. God delivers water from a rock in the wilderness. Naaman's leprosy is healed by washing in the water of the Jordan River. Jonah is saved from drowning in the water of the sea. Jesus changes water into wine and washes his disciples' feet with water.

### Sharing

- > *What other Bible passages or stories do you recall or can you find that feature water?*

## Water Notes

Over the years my daughter has become something of a collector of quotations—inspirational, funny, thought-provoking, challenging. She has posted them on her bulletin board and covered the walls of her room. I'm always on the lookout for new quotations to send her, just to let her know I'm thinking of her. People who

keep scrapbooks or journals often look for an apt quotation or image to capture an idea.

As you have explored these biblical images of water, you may have discovered or rediscovered verses or phrases of support, encouragement, strength, and joy. If a verse or thought is meaningful to you, it may be worth saving or sharing with others.

### Consider

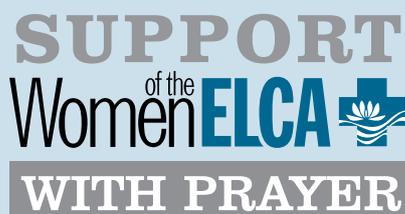
- Compiling a personal collection of biblical water verses, with supporting images, photos, poetry, prayers, or meditations
- Putting together a group devotional for your congregation or women's organization, perhaps for next Lent
- Developing notecards that can be used to mark baptisms and baptismal anniversaries

### Closing

Turn your attention once again to the bowl of water in your midst. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for God's gift of water and for the water stories and experiences shared in this time together. Ask for God's healing presence with any who have need. Ask for God's blessing on any future activities and for the daily lives of those who have participated.

If you wish, sing or read aloud the opening hymn again. 🌸

**The Rev. Karen Bockelman** is assistant to the bishop in the North-eastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA. She is presenting an adaptation of this Bible study to the delegates and participants of the Seventh Triennial Convention and Gathering of Women of the ELCA in Salt Lake City, Utah, July 8–10 and 10–13.



**Women of the ELCA in Convention and Gathering in Salt Lake City need the support of Women of the ELCA at home.**

- > Ask God's blessings on the delegates, new officers and board members, and outgoing officers and board members at the Convention, and on the speakers, worship leaders, chaplains, workshop leaders, and organizers of the Gathering.
- > Ask God's blessings on all those whom the women will meet along the way: flight attendants, pilots, bus drivers, cab drivers, waiters, waitresses, clerks in shops, hotel workers, convention center workers.